

Oral History

SOL FRIEDMAN

April 1985

Introduction

Sol Friedman's oral history was commissioned by his children and grandchildren, who wished to preserve his recollections for future generations.

Mr. Friedman is a modest, gentle man who is a generous supporter of both his community and Israel. Although he couldn't speak English when he arrived in this country not quite eighteen years old, Mr. Friedman's innate intelligence accounts for achievements far beyond his limited schooling. Perceptive and industrious, Mr. Friedman created his own opportunities as a clothing salesman to agricultural workers in the San Joaquin Valley and elsewhere.

One anecdote not recorded illustrates his keenness. While at a dinner party at the home of his son and daughter-in-law, Herb and Marianne, Mr. Friedman described to us in great detail the methods and tools used in harvesting asparagus. He had never taken part in this process, but with his curiosity and eagerness to learn, he had closely observed the harvesting technique.

Another evidence of his desire for knowledge is his attendance of several bible study classes and his decision to be bar mitzvah at the age of eighty-three.

The recording of Mr. Friedman's memoirs followed a preliminary interview. Two taping sessions of approximately two hours each were held in the Concordia Club in San Francisco on April 8 and 10, 1985. After the initial transcribing, his children decided that the material be edited into narrative form.

I hope this memoir will present many occasions of pleasant reminiscences for the present generations and those to come.

Eleanor K. Glaser
Interviewer-Editor

Bar Mitzvah Speech

July 13, 1985 (24 Tamuz)

Rabbi Schranz, Cantor Reich, Max, fellow congregants,
my dear family and friends,

The good Lord has seen fit to bless me with a bonus of thirteen years beyond the proverbial three score and ten. The same thirteen years when a boy becomes a full-fledged member of the Jewish community after studying and being called to the Torah.

I am a member of the B'nai Brith Bible Breakfast Club and the San Francisco Bible Breakfast Club, and Rabbi Schranz's weekly Talmud class -- and when I learned that the first chapter of Jeremiah is the portion read on my birthday, I was prompted to plan for this bar mitzvah.

A while back, my grandson Marty said to me, "Zaida, do you remember your bar mitzvah?" and I couldn't give him an honest answer because I didn't remember. Russia was at war when I was thirteen. It was a time of tumult and destruction. We feared for our lives. Who had time to think about bar mitzvah in such confusion? Probably I wasn't bar mitzvah, because all of us had survival first on our minds. Before the war there were the pogroms. During the war we feared cruelty from both the Russian troops and the villagers surrounding our town, and the October 1917 Revolution that threatened our lives.

In studying Jeremiah, it seemed to me that Chapter One related to my own experiences during those troubled times. This beautiful chapter tells about the invasion of Jerusalem by Babylon. In Chapter One, Verse Eight, the Lord tells Jeremiah not to be afraid, for He is with him and will deliver him. Verses Thirteen and Fourteen read: "And the word of the Lord came unto me the second time, saying, 'What seest thou?' And I said: 'I see a seething pot; and the face thereof is from the north.'" (That is, the north which is Babylon.) "Then the Lord said unto me: 'Out of the north the evil shall break upon all the inhabitants of the land.'"

It seemed to me that what Jeremiah saw was like the war and revolution in Russia. The boiling pot was eastern Europe, which had no future for Jews in the shtetlich or in the cities.

And God was good to me. I was fortunate to escape the gehanna of eastern Europe for this lovely city. My wonderful brother, Morris, may he rest in peace, was here in San

Francisco and helped me to get started earning a living. But a living isn't everything. A man's greatest fortune is his family, and for that my wife Fay deserves all the credit. They say behind every successful man there is a woman. That is Fay. While I was on the road for forty years, she raised our lovely children. We are now blessed with bright, beautiful grandchildren who are a credit to their parents.

I want to thank Rabbi Schranz, Cantor Reich, and Max for encouraging me to prepare myself for this bar mitzvah, and to thank all of you for sharing this special day with me.

I want to thank my nephew, Joe; his wife, Dot; my niece, Dora and her family. A special thanks to my "machateniv" Bea, and her son, Sid, for coming from Los Angeles. I thank my brother-in-law Yak Goldberg; his wife, Shulamith; and children. Also, Reuben Calic; his wife, Bess; and his children. They all made a special trip from the Peninsula. I am very happy they are all here in good numbers. I am honored to have a number of my friends from the bible clubs here to share this special shabbat with me.

I want to thank my grandson Marc, for coming from Israel to share this simcha with me. I also want to thank my daughter, Mona; her husband, Mark; and her children, Jill and Marty, for coming from Rochester, New York. Naturally, I want to express my joy in having my son, Herb; his wife, Marianne; and my lovely granddaughter, Jennifer; and my daughter, Lila; her husband, Bert; my granddaughter, Lisa; her husband, Jim; and my great-grandson, Kevin, for sharing this wonderful day with me as well. I am only sorry my grandson Steve could not be present.

---Sol Friedman

I. The Old Country

I was born on July 10, 1902, in the Hebrew month Tamuz, in a little town called Chernevitzi in the Ukraine, about twenty miles from the Dniester River. My mother, as long as I can remember, was always sick in bed. My father, he was supposed to be a tutor, and we were always struggling. As a little boy, I remember we were always struggling to make a living. My father was named Israel Joseph, and my mother's name was Leah. Her maiden name was Skolnick.

We were eleven brothers and one sister. But what I remember is four brothers, with me five, and I was the youngest in the family. Six brothers and the sister died. I only remember one younger brother than me, who died. I could have been maybe about six, seven years old, and he was a little younger. The rest of them were already grown men, you know, being some brothers died. So the brothers that I remember, we were probably about eight years apart. And one brother, my oldest brother, he was actually a half-brother, 'cause my father's first wife died and he married a sister to the wife.

When he married her, my mother was no more than fifteen years old. Our brother was just like her own brother. His mother died out of childbirth, and the brother, his name was Benyamin...I remember him as the older brother, and then I had another, Avraham, and then another brother, Naphtali, and one brother, Moishe, and my name is Zalman, and I was the youngest. In our shtetl, when a child was born there was no birth certificate. The child was registered by the rabbi appointed by the czar. It did not have to be necessarily religious. My father wrote down all the children's birthdays in a prayer book, which must have been lost.

As I said, my mother was sick. My father always struggled, he didn't make enough, so she used to sell whiskey in the house to peasants that used to come, and she used to sell it by the glass. I don't think there was enough to make a living, but even sick in bed she used to get up, and naturally my father couldn't...you know, he did not mix in in that. But I remember even as a little boy I used to help out a little bit.

What I can recollect is from approximately the age of nine, in 1911. That was the year my mother died. She was no more than fifty. I remember her bedridden for some time; she must have had a heart ailment. I remember Mendel Bayles' trial the very same year. He was convicted for mutilating a twelve-year-old boy, a Christian boy, and using

his blood for the Passover rituals. For more about that trial, read Bernard Malamud's book The Fixer.

My mother came from a little town called Lechinitz, about thirty miles distant from Chernevitzi. When I was no more than six or seven, my mother took me to visit her mother in Lechnitz. My grandmother must have been very old. Her name was Olga. They were five sisters and one half brother. My father did not have any family in that little town. Where he came from, I don't know, but I remember he used to tell me that he came from somewhere deep in Russia, that he ran away because at that time the czar was taking little children and raising them up to seventeen, eighteen, then they put them in the army. So he escaped the town, and how he landed in the town where we lived, I don't know. I'm very sorry, I should have asked. But those years, you know, the war broke out, and then we were always on the run. So I did not ask the question.

I don't think my mother had any education, but my father, he was searching for education. He was quite an educated man, naturally, in the bible. But he was not a fanatic, he was a modern man. And of course his livelihood was teaching. He had a little cheder, they call it, in our house. I remember he told me when he was a young man in his thirties, he decided to take up...he went in for bookkeeping, and he took up Karl Marx's theory, and he used to get, by correspondence, excellent grades. He was like an adventurous man.

After the war broke out, we moved to...I don't remember. Maybe it was before the war broke out. I had a brother living in Bessarabia, the town was called Lipkon, and where he was working was a big food store, a very exclusive food store, and they needed a bookkeeper. My father took that position as a bookkeeper, and the proprietor of that store was very pleased with him.

While he studied Karl Marx, he was not a communist. But he was not a fanatic, like the very pious Jews in the old country. He observed holidays, but he was more or less a modern man. When he was teaching in our little town, it was only Hebrew and Yiddish, and he felt that we should also have Russian. And he made propaganda in that little town, that they should have Russian. Both the private teachers, and when there was a school, finally, that they should take up Russian. He succeeded, and they started teaching Russian. At that time, and those years there at the beginning of the century, it was considered, you know, a big movement, to start teaching Russian. He was not the only one. There were other teachers there, too. They were called "melamed." But my father was practically the only one that started in teaching Russian. The others were

teaching a little bit Russian, not too much.

So he was a--as a matter of fact there were three brothers-in-law, and he was considered the aristocrat. His brothers-in-law had payas and beards, but he used to trim his beard, and he used to be dressed, not in the long kaf-tans. He was more of a modern man. The orthodox people looked at him as what we would call an apikoras, a free thinker.

I remember, as a little boy naturally, we had several synagogues. We lived not far from the Rav, the rabbi of the town there, and he had his own services. My father used to go every Saturday morning. Every day he didn't go, but every Saturday morning he used to go to the rabbi's. In his house he had a little minyan. There was a Chevra Kadisha, a burial society, as I remember. As a little boy, when my father couldn't make it, he used to give me the book there to collect for the weak, for the sick. It (the organization) is called Bikur Cholim and I used to go there and enter in the little book the names of those houses. One would give ten kopecs, one would give fifty kopecs, and that was a weekly collection.

Chernevitzi wasn't in the Jewish Pale. It was in the Ukraine, and we could travel from one part to the other. I would say we were about three hundred, three hundred fifty Jewish families in Chernevitzi. Some of them were in the wine business, and some had little grocery stores. Some had piece goods stores, and naturally there were carpenters. And in a little town, that was their livelihood. There were no farmers in our town. None. This was a shtetl. In the villages, naturally, there were some--wherever Jews lived, there were farmers. But in our town, in the shtetl, there were not any farmers.

In Chernevitzi there were about three hundred fifty families, only Jews. But around our town, there were some villagers--peasants. And maybe there was one or two families in each village, and they didn't have their own land. They would have the land that is called "poretz." It means the one that owns the land. Usually the poretz never paid any attention, but used to hire a Jew to take care of his land. He was like a manager.

The landowners which were called "pretzim," owned the land, and they always used to travel all over the country. They would have someone, called a "possessor," and he used to take care of the land on the outskirts of the town and around it. The manager would be either a Jew or a gentile. For instance, if there was a forest they used to lease it out from the poretz, or if the poretz did not sell it, he used to manage it himself. But when he'd lease it from the

poretz, it means like a percentage.

The relationship between the Jews in town and the gentiles in the surrounding villages was not good at all. Whenever they wanted to have a little holiday, they used to have a pogrom. If you saw "Fiddler on the Roof," that's not exaggerated, that's what we lived through. And especially, that happened on the day of the market. In our town, every Thursday was a market. Peasants used to bring their wares, like food, chickens. They used to bring it to the market and sell. Then the peasants used to get drunk, they wanted a holiday, they started breaking windows. And we lived through all that.

I actually did not have any education at all. I remember my father, when he had some children coming into the house for his cheder, so with me he said, "You just listen." He did not want to devote his time with me, because of his balebatim. You know, they send the children to school and if they see that he pays attention to me they'd think it's not right. So he did not pay much attention to me. And then when the war broke out, there was no cheder at all. I don't remember going to any cheder, except when my father was teaching those few years. Then after, when he took a position as a bookkeeper after the war broke out, I was already working for somebody. So I didn't have the chance to go to cheder.

When my mother died, I was about nine years old, ten, maybe. But when I was ten or eleven, I went to work for a food store, like a delicatessen. My father arranged with those people for twenty rubles for six months, and also they were supposed to buy me a pair of boots. You know, then the mud was very high. The first six months when I worked there, I was supposed to work in the store, but very little that they used to use me. They had a little baby, and they used to send me home to take care of the baby, paint the buggy. You know, like an errand boy. I was very much disgusted with that work there. So then I started looking.

At the time I worked in the food store for six months, my two single brothers lived and worked in Moguliev on the Dniester River. They helped out my father by sending money from time to time. In 1912, my brother Naphtali got married to a girl from Lipkon, Bessarabia, and he settled there.

Then after that I went to work for a piece goods store. I was already maybe about eleven or twelve years old. And we used to travel also. In different towns they had the market. Like in our town, it was Thursday. It was called the "yarid". That's the day of the marketplace. We used to go and set up a booth and sell the piece goods.

Then when I was about twelve, a man, his name was Nissen, he was a hunchback. They called him "Nissela Habota." "Habota" means a hunchback. I used to go with him, and we used to sell on that marketplace -- it's like a flea market, you know. Then after that, when we had to buy merchandise, he used to give me a list. I was no more than twelve years old, maybe, and I used to go to Moluf, the next biggest town from our shtetl. I used to bring the piece goods home. Piece goods are fabrics. Besides going in the market, he had also a store in that little town, Chernevitz. In Yiddish they call it "Chernevitz." It's not the big Chernevitz, it's the little Chernevitz. Because in the Bukovina, instead of Chernevitz, we used to call it "Kleine Chernevitz," "Little Chernevitz."

At that time, my brother next to me, Moishe, was no more maybe around twenty or twenty-one years old. He worked in that town, Moluf, and his dream was to go to America. We had an uncle in Chester, Pennsylvania, by the name of Miller. Zalman Miller. Just before the war broke out, Moishe wrote a letter to him, and he sent Moishe some papers and money, and he prepared himself to come to America. It was 1913, and Moishe came to our shtetl to say goodbye. My mother died, and I had a stepmother, and I told him he should think of me, he shouldn't forget me, to send for me. He promised me that he's going to do it, but after, when he was already on the ship to land in America, the war broke out. It was already the end of 1913 or '14, and after the war broke out we lost contact. And we did not hear from my brother Naphtali till way after 1921 (after I escaped Russia), because Bessarabia was under the domination of the czar.

When the war broke out, I was about twelve years old. For the first few months we were jubilant in our shtetl, but that didn't last long. There was confusion, since every few months there was a different regime, such as the Bolsheviks. Whenever the Cossacks passed our village, they killed and they robbed.

I remember the Austrian army came into our town on the way to the Black Sea, and they went as far as Odessa. But when they attacked, we knew what was going to happen if we would be left in the town. So a good portion of the Jews ran with the Austrian army to another town. The name was Tomashpol. But it didn't take very long and the Austrians started retreating. The Russians ran and the Austrians attacked, but I think right near Odessa the Austrian army was defeated. The Russian army attacked them, and they started running back, the Austrian army.

I'll never forget that day when they started back. The Russian army, naturally in collaboration with the villagers,

1920, when my father died--he literally died of starvation-- I saw there was no future for me in Russia.

II. Escape from Russia

In spite of difficult times, I started speculating with sugar. That was already, I would say, 1919-1920, because I remember when I decided to leave Russia, I was speculating with sugar. I had four sacks of sugar, which each sack probably weighed about two hundred pounds. And it was also the end of the Revolution, there were already the Bolsheviks, and it was against the law. But in order to survive we took chances, because the life was worthless, anyway.

When I decided to leave, I sold the sacks of sugar for thousands and thousands of rubles. My intention was to come to Romania, in Bessarabia. Originally it was Russia, but after the war it belonged to Romania. So when I sold those four sacks of sugar, I traded in the rubles and I got eight five-dollar gold pieces, for all that money, the thousands of rubles. At that time, the head of government was Petlura.

So when I decided to leave, I got those eight five-dollar gold pieces. If they searched me, they would take them away. I wore burlap pants, which I was lucky to get burlap, and I wore with suspenders. So I cut off the buttons from the pants and I covered up each five-dollar gold piece with burlap. One here, one here, all around there, and that's how I was lucky to leave with my money, the forty rubles to go with into Romania.

At that time, all the young people, elderly people, they were trying whichever way we could escape. And that's the time I decided there was no future anymore in that little town to remain. Those two others, I don't remember exactly their names, and myself, we decided... It was on a Thursday, when it was our marketplace. There was a pogrom in our town, and we all three of us decided that's it, no longer.

We decided to leave our little town and go to the Romanian border, which it's called Yaruga, and near there is the Dniester River, which divides Romania and Russia, and to cross into the Romanian border. Before the war, it was Russia, but after the war, Bessarabia became Romania. Yaruga was about three miles to go right exactly to the borderline, the Dniester River. There we met those called "contrabandchick" who were dealing with the Romanian

gendarmes.

In order to pay off, we made arrangements with them. It was on a Thursday, we got there, and they kept us in the basement (there could have been about three hundred steps down) in order to know when it's clear to cross the border. It had to be already in the winter, because the Dniester River was already freezing, there were ice floes. It was on a Sunday night, it could have been maybe around midnight, and there we crossed by a little rowboat, no more. I would call it about three feet, a small one, you know. And the man that crosses the river there, in order to make us feel good, he said, "Oh, Friday night I took across a woman and a child there, and they got drowned!" But we took chances.

So when we crossed the river, the little town there is called Ottic, near the little town of Zduritza. They prepared us that where we crossed the river there'll be a Romanian patrol there, and you have to have some money to pay them off. So we got some money ready, that Petlura money, and also Romanian money, in order to pay them off. So the minute we crossed the Dniester River, they were already there waiting for us. But as long as you paid them, it was fine. Then after that, when we were already in a house about three miles from that river (it was all organized there), and it was around maybe three o'clock in the morning, gendarmes, the patrol, knocked again on the door. We had to give some more money.

The next morning, we came into a little town called Zduritza. There, they already had a Commitat. It was part of the HIAS, a committee to take care of the refugees. Being that I had a brother in Lipkon, my aim was to go to my brother. From that town to my brother's place by -- I think they had already trains -- it couldn't have been no more than four or five hours. But I couldn't do it -- I didn't have any papers. So we had to go by horse and buggy. We had to go by back roads there. Until I got there, it took me about a week's time because I stayed over in those little towns until it was clear to go. So when I got in to my brother's house, he was not home, because he was traveling, he was a salesman. But when he came back and he saw me, he fainted, because from 1913 to 1920, there was no contact.

This was my brother Naphtali, who had married a girl from that town, from Lipkon. And he was also working in that store where my father became bookkeeper. So naturally, after the war he remained there, and he lived there all his life.

He told me that he heard that some people made contact through a rabbi in a town called by the name Soroka. The rabbi of that town used to help out a lot of them. But my

brother was afraid, so he never even attempted to see whether he could make contact with me. So naturally, when I appeared there without his help, he was surprised. He gave me the information that he corresponds with my brother Moishe that was already in San Francisco, and he told me that my brother Moishe always wrote in every letter, "See whether you could get him out." He was concerned.

After seeing my brother, we immediately dispatched a letter to my brother Moishe in San Francisco. Within two weeks I received a letter and two hundred dollars to prepare all necessary documents to come to San Francisco.

Naphtali didn't know that my father died. My father died in 1920, just before I left, a few months before. It was on a Friday when I came in, and I didn't want to spoil the shabbat. I had to say kaddish, so I went to a different shul. Friday night my brother went to shul, but I went to a different shul in order he shouldn't see me say kaddish. So one of the men, Yeheshuah Darer, that I knew from before, because we lived in that town before the war when my father was bookkeeper there. So he comes over to my brother, to Naphtali, he says, "Why don't you say kaddish?" So naturally it spoiled his shabbat. Then I told him then my father died. He literally died of starvation, because there was no food.

My brothers Avraham and Benjamin stayed in Russia. Benjamin was a half-brother, from my father's first marriage. He had a big family. I left them there, of course. After I came to San Francisco, my brother Moishe and I, we tried to bring Naphtali out. That was maybe a year after I got here. I was doing pretty good the first year, so my brother and I gave Naphtali a proposition that we'd like to take him out. So he gave us an ultimatum: he would come, provided we could open up a store for him!

I was in Romania, at my brother's house, in order to wait for Moishe to send money. It didn't take very long, maybe about two or three weeks, my brother sent me two hundred dollars to prepare myself some papers. In Romania at that time if you had money, you could do anything. You know, I became a Romanian, even a native, got papers that I was born in Romania. And I started getting ready my papers to leave Romania.

At the same time I met for the first time relatives. You see my brother Moishe married a first cousin, Brucha Maltzer, and her father, Itzik Maltzer, was my uncle. My brother wrote to them that I am already in Lipkon. They lived in Vale La Lui Vlad, it's a little town also called Dombrovitz. It's not far from Beltz. They also escaped from Russia. They came from Kapaigorod.

When my brother wrote to them that I'm in Lipkon, they sent an uncle called Chaim Aaron. Without notifying us, he came to Lipkon, and he said, "Zalman, I gotta take you to my place, we got a letter from your brother. Naturally, you got to take the two hundred dollars with you, whatever you have left, and you will wait, and you'll go with the Maltzer family." I was not quite eighteen years old, and my brother was afraid for me, so he thought it would be a good idea we should get together. He meant well, but then it took almost a year before we got to America. It delayed me because I had my papers and everything to leave, just to buy the steamship ticket and to leave. But when he wanted it that way, so naturally I went to that little town.

But while I was in Lipkon, I worked. I helped out my brother, because he was in the citrus business. I used to go on the street with a little basket and sell lemons and oranges. It was imported. You could get an orange or a lemon, but it was a rarity. I'll never forget the scene when my mother was sick in bed, and somehow she got an orange from Moliv -- Moliv was a bigger town. She got one orange because she was sick, and she had to eat it sparingly, one of the little oranges. She gave it to me to taste, and I'll never forget that taste up to this day!

I had money, but my relatives were penniless. They also had to start preparing papers, and it took I would say almost a year, and we all went together. In order to obtain a visa to go to the U.S.A., it was easier to be Romanian citizens. There were men who specialized in preparing all the necessary papers and passports. In order to save twenty dollars to get my own separate passport, they decided that I should be my uncle's son, fourteen years old, by the name Zalman Maltzer. So I should look younger, they decided I should wear kneepants. I looked hideous. The very same day I arrived in San Francisco, my brother took one look at me in that outfit and took me and outfitted me with a suit, shirt, and shoes.

It took a year because we had to wait until our turn came. We waited for our papers in Bucharest for almost one year. While we were in Bucharest we couldn't work. Just whatever money they sent from San Francisco we lived on. We finally departed from Antwerp, Belgium, crossing the Atlantic Ocean on the Cunard steamship the S.S. Zeeland. We were my uncle Itzik Maltzer and his wife, Ethel, and their son, Sy and his new wife, Dina. Also my uncle's widowed daughter-in-law, Mika, and her two children. Altogether we were eight.

My money went. At the same time, they wired America for money. Money came from my brother and two brothers-in-law. My brother's wife also had a brother by the name

a year. And as a matter of fact, he didn't even want to take any money, so I told him, if you're not going to take any money that I'm going to move out. So I paid him five dollars a week. Well, at that time five dollars a week was quite a bit. But he was more than a brother, he was like a father to me. He and his wife, Becky, were very, very, good to me. Parents could not be any better.

When we first arrived, my brother Moishe had a store on 2335 Mission Street, and in the back of his store there was a cottage which he gave to the Maltzer family. There was our uncle Itzik (Isaac) who was Moishe's father-in-law, and his wife. Itzik married again. His first wife was my aunt, my mother's sister. But he married again. They called her Meema Ethel. Meema means aunt. And also there was Sy and his wife, Itzik's son who got married in Romania just before they came here. Sy was Moishe's brother-in-law and also his cousin, you know, my sister-in-law's brother. And Betty's mother and Betty. They lived all in that back cottage there, and I lived in my brother's flat there. They lived in the front and the store was underneath. And I lived with them for a year's time.

Maybe the second day, my brother and I went down to the post office and applied for the first citizenship papers. I told them the truth, that I came under the name of Zalman Maltzer on the Zealand ship, but my real name is Zalman Friedman. I told the reason why I did it, and I showed them the entry when I came in. That was 1921, and I had to wait two years to apply for my second papers. In 1927 I became a citizen.

Louis Licht, my cousin Sy Maltzer's brother-in-law, had a furniture store and my brother had a dry goods store, and they discussed, "What are we going to do with the greeneh?" So Mr. Licht decided, "We'll take in Sy into the furniture store, and you take in Zalman into the dry goods store." But my brother says, "No, I don't want to do that. I want him to be in business for himself. I don't want him to start in to work for somebody."

About a week after my arrival, my brother went downtown with me and Sy to the wholesalers. We got suitcases and filled them up with ladies' stockings, dresses, and all kinds of things. He said, "You go ahead and start knocking from door to door." I remember the first day. Moishe had a store, and he also had a truck -- he used to sell merchandise to the farmers in the farms around San Francisco. He dropped me off in North Beach at Francisco Street and said, "You go ahead and start working the streets from door to door, and show 'em your wares..."

So the first day, I started in and he dropped me off, I

whatever I needed, I used to go to the wholesale houses and buy it.

At that time when I first started in peddling with the suitcases, we went down to M. L. Fleischman & Co. That's the first time we filled up the suitcase. And after that we used to buy some from Milton G. Cooper, Nustader Brothers, and Al Dinkelspiel Co., Levi Strauss, and a lot of it in the auction.

From the jobbers, we used to buy pants, shirts, and whatever. As far as clothing is concerned, I did not stock any clothing. But whenever I had an order for a suit there were some jobbers I used to go to. I'd go to Altman and get a suit on memorandum and sell it, in order not to keep stock. Clothing is men's suits. Dry goods takes in pants, shirts, sweaters, underwear.

In the auction, if I had a chance, I would buy women's dresses. I would buy them and then I already had outlets for them. Later on, when I had a truck, I expanded my route, so I could always try to sell it.

Betty and I were married in June 1924, and Lila was born September 25, 1929. Actually it wasn't a happy marriage, because Betty fell in love with one of my best friends, Philip Bibel, and eloped with him. My little girl was only about two-and-a-half years old, that was 1932.

IV. Promoting Yiddish Culture

Betty and I worked for the Yiddish Folk Schule, and just because we spoke Yiddish, some considered us radicals. But actually, we were not Communists. We also belonged to a literary dramatic club, which I took part in it. I used to take part in many plays, Yiddish plays, and so did my ex, Betty.

The Folk Schule was separate. We had a folk schule to teach Jewish children Yiddish. At that time about three hundred children used to attend the school. We were the organizers. It cost us money. We brought out teachers, we bought a building. We had it on 1057 Steiner Street, San Francisco. Just a few young fellows and we bought the building. At that time, to pay ten thousand dollars (and it cost me two or three hundred dollars), it was a lot of money.

Others in my family were not much interested in Yiddish. But being that we had just come from the old

country, and we were a group at that time, twenty-five, thirty people, so naturally we were more interested in that dramatic group. And so our life was different than my family's life. But they never criticized. My brother Moishe was the most wonderful person. He did not interfere with me.

As far as forgetting about Yiddish, first of all, I couldn't, because my English, I knew, was poor. The reason was because I used to deal with Italians, so naturally, I spoke Italian. And when I expanded, I used to go in the field where there were Mexicans, so I picked up Spanish, a little Portuguese. So therefore, my English was limited. I was interested in Yiddish.

About the literary dramatic club, I had a role in "The Blacksmith's Daughter", and I had a role in a play called "Shop", and I was the manager for that production. I arranged the props and all that, and I also acted. And I also acted in a play by Peretz Hirschbein. In Yiddish it's "Greenh Felder" -- "Green Fields." Peretz Hirschbein was a great Jewish writer. And I also played in Jacob Gordon's "Gott, Mensch and Teifel," "God, Man and the Devil." And I took part in "Menschen" by Sholom Aleichem, a one-act play. I used to take part in different sketches, dialogues, and two people talking.

From 1921 to 1924 we used to meet quite often. Then when I got married, Betty used to play, too. I think that folded up in the 1940s. A lot of them moved away, and some died. But in the 1930s, the early 1930s and in the late 1920s, we used to meet quite often. We used to have a group of about sometimes twenty five, thirty people, and we used to play the Scottish Rite Auditorium.

We did a play by Sholom Aleichem, called "It's Hard to be a Jew." And in the story there it shows about the pogroms. Sholom Aleichem wasn't towards the left, but he always criticized the well-to-do, and he was in sympathy with the poor. We used to read many short stories by I.L. Peretz. And if you know the story about Bontshe Schweig, you know a poor man, in a little town, and he's always hungry. When he dies and comes to heaven, the angels asked him, "What do you like to have, Bontshe?" he says, "Frish shtickel bilke," a fresh roll. That was his desire.

So many times we spent a thousand dollars and we had a thousand and six dollars deficit, so we called it a moral success. But we enjoyed that. We used to bring in lecturers, Jewish writers, and we had to guarantee them. And if they were fellows that wouldn't bring in enough expenses, we had to dig into our pockets and cover the expense. So then many times I used to have lectures at my

house. This was after I married Fay, after 1929.

I remember once we had a lecture at my house with Dr. Chaim Zhitlovsky, great Yiddish writer, great thinker. As a matter of fact it was his last lecture. On the way from our house to Canada, he died. And when we used to bring Peretz Hirschbein down, he used to stay with us, and we used to arrange the lectures. Even up to the 1970s, we opened our home to many lecturers and held gatherings for many Jewish causes.

The same with the Yiddish writers in those years. When they used to come to San Francisco they used to write to me, could I go with them and sell their books. Many times I had lectures at my house of Jewish writers in order to save money for them.

For instance, just the day before yesterday, we were in shule Saturday and there was a woman, the director of Yad Vashem, and she gave a talk about Yad Vashem. Her husband is with her. After the services in shule, we greeted the rabbi. She was talking with the rabbi, and then she said, "By the way, do you know of any cheap hotel? I've got to be back to San Jose tomorrow." They had stayed in San Jose with some friends, and she wanted to sleep over, she wants to see San Francisco. So what do you think we did? We said, "Come with us." We made lunch for them, they stayed with us, we made dinner for them, they slept over. The next morning my wife gave them a ride. In the afternoon, on the way to the Greyhound bus, (I don't drive, but the man that works for me does) they saw Fisherman's Wharf and Chinatown. They hadn't seen the crooked street so we took a detour and we showed them the crooked street, and we took them down to the Greyhound bus.

I could give you another illustration. About two years ago we went to the airport to pick up our granddaughter from Rochester, and at the same time there was a couple waiting for their luggage. My wife hears them talking Hebrew, so she started a conversation. They were asking how to go to Lombard Street, they heard there were some cheap motels there at Lombard Street. So we said, "Come on, we live close by." We take them in the car and then my wife whispers to me, "Maybe we ought to invite them to the house." For an Israeli it means a lot, because of their inflation. So we invite them to the house, and they stay with us a week's time. At the end of the week, the man (Gaby) said to my wife, "Be sure to let me know when you come to Israel...not only could I come to the airport, but I could walk on to the plane, because I am an officer in the Police Patrol." On my wife's subsequent visit to Israel, he took her to lunch at the Knesset (Parliament), where they dined with the head of the Druze movement and another female

Knesset member who happened to be in our home in the late fifties when she was on her honeymoon in San Francisco!

And another story. We were in Israel in 1971 with our children and grandchildren to celebrate our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. We gave a party in a rental hall. We had over one hundred twenty five people there, including four Knesset members. We had also bought an apartment in Tel Aviv that time, so also it was a sort of housewarming celebration for family and friends. We were four generations at that party: my wife's mother Sheina Calic, us, our two children (Herb and Mona), their spouses (Marianne and Darrell), and their children (Marc, Jennifer and Jill).

V. Transitions

From 1921 to 1929, my brother and I had an apartment house on Capp Street, a six unit building. We bought a store on Mission Street and we used to buy stock. I wouldn't say we were millionaires, but we did pretty good in those years, and we did pretty good on the road. But 1929, when the Depression came, we lost it all. We lost the store, the building, the apartment we sold, and we were on the verge to go bankrupt. And the reason why we didn't go bankrupt then was due to the people that we owe the mortgage on the store. They also were in the manufacturing business --Goldstone Brothers, Co-op Manufacturing Company. We owed them quite a bit of money. And my brother and I, we went. They knew it, our circumstances. We asked if we should declare ourselves bankrupt. He says, "Don't do that. You're young; don't ruin your name." He says, "Don't worry about me. Whenever you're be able, pay us back and don't declare bankruptcy." And sure enough, he encouraged us, we did not declare ourselves bankrupt, and eventually we paid him off, I don't remember the exact sum we owed, we paid him off in '33.

I wasn't able to get home every night, I used to stay out two or three days, sometimes four days. During the season work, I used to drive around the San Joaquin Valley, the Sacramento Valley. And in the winter months, when there were no laborers, I used to work around the coast. I used to go all the way up to the Oregon border.

It was a struggle from 1929 to '33, but Roosevelt became president and after that things changed and I started in again, and I've been doing pretty good. Of course the separation with the first wife in '32 made it very bad for me, I felt kind of depressed.

The Jewish Literary
and
Dramatic Club
Program

SCOTTISH - RITE AUDITORIUM
Van Ness Avenue and Sutter Street



SUNDAY, MARCH 6, 1927